

## WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for providing access to a network system, wherein the network  
5 system includes a plurality of access points coupled to a network, the method comprising:  
a first access point receiving identification information from a portable computing  
device, wherein the identification information indicates a wireless service provider of a  
plurality of possible wireless service providers;  
determining the wireless service provider for the portable computing device after  
10 receiving the identification information;  
the first access point receiving data from the portable computing device; and  
providing network access to the portable computing device through the wireless  
service provider determined in said determining.
- 15 2. The method of claim 1, wherein said first access point is operable to  
accommodate subscribers of each of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.
3. The method of claim 2, further comprising:  
the first access point recognizing a System ID (SID) of a plurality of possible  
20 SIDs, wherein each of the plurality of possible SIDs is associated with a respective one of  
the plurality of possible wireless service providers.
4. The method of claim 3, further comprising:  
the first access point maintaining associations between the plurality of possible  
25 SIDs and the plurality of possible wireless service providers.
5. The method of claim 3, further comprising:  
the first access point maintaining associations between the plurality of possible  
SIDs and a plurality of active subscribers.

6. The method of claim 2, further comprising:  
the first access point broadcasting a plurality of possible SIDs, wherein each of the  
plurality of possible SIDs is associated with a respective one of the plurality of possible  
5 wireless service providers.

7. The method of claim 1, wherein said first access point is operable to  
function as a wireless service provider access point for each of the plurality of possible  
wireless service providers.

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8. The method of claim 1, wherein said first access point comprises computer  
software which implements a plurality of virtual access points, wherein each virtual  
access point corresponds to one of the plurality of possible wireless service providers, and  
wherein each virtual access point provides network access services to the corresponding  
15 wireless service provider.

9. The method of claim 8, wherein each virtual access point provides access  
point functionality implemented in software, wherein each virtual access point appears as  
a physical access point to the portable computing device.

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10. The method of claim 8, wherein each virtual access point (AP) executes a  
wireless protocol stack.

11. The method of claim 10, wherein the wireless protocol stack comprises an  
25 IEEE 802.11 wireless protocol stack.

12. The method of claim 8, wherein each virtual access point (AP) includes an  
Extended Service Set ID (ESSID), and wherein each ESSID corresponds to one of the  
plurality of possible wireless service providers.

13. The method of claim 1, wherein said providing network access comprises providing the data received from the portable computing device to a destination based on the determined wireless service provider.

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14. The method of claim 1, wherein the network system is useable by subscribers of each of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

15. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
10 maintaining and storing a usage amount by the portable computing device;  
wherein the determined wireless service provider charges for access by the portable computing device to the network.

16. The method of claim 1, wherein the network system includes a memory  
15 medium which stores a data structure comprising a list of identification information and a corresponding list of the plurality of possible wireless service providers; and  
wherein said determining the wireless service provider for the portable computing device includes accessing the memory medium and using the received identification information to determine the wireless service provider.

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17. The method of claim 1, wherein the network system includes a memory  
medium which stores a data structure comprising a list of identification information, a  
corresponding list of the plurality of possible wireless service providers, and associated  
methods for providing data to the respective plurality of possible wireless service  
25 providers; and

wherein said determining the wireless service provider for the portable computing device includes accessing the memory medium, using the received identification information to determine the wireless service provider, and using an associated method for providing the data to the wireless service provider.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein the data structure stores a destination address indicating a destination specified by the wireless service provider; and

wherein said providing the data comprises providing the data to the destination  
5 specified by the wireless service provider.

19. The method of claim 1, wherein the plurality of access points are maintained by a first wireless service provider; and

wherein the identification information indicates a second wireless service  
10 provider.

20. The method of claim 1, wherein the identification information comprises a System ID, wherein the System ID uniquely identifies the wireless service provider of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

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21. The method of claim 1, wherein the identification information comprises an Extended Service Set ID (ESSID), wherein the ESSID uniquely identifies the wireless service provider of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

20 22. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

the first access point receiving identification information from a portable computing device, wherein the identification information indicates a first wireless service provider of the plurality of possible wireless service providers;

determining the first wireless service provider for the portable computing device  
25 after receiving the identification information;

the first access point receiving data from the portable computing device;

providing the data received from the portable computing device to a destination associated with the first wireless service provider;

the first access point receiving identification information from a portable computing device, wherein the identification information indicates a second wireless service provider of the plurality of possible wireless service providers;

determining the second wireless service provider for the portable computing device after receiving the identification information;

the first access point receiving data from the portable computing device; and

providing the data received from the portable computing device to a destination associated with the second wireless service provider.

23. The method of claim 1,

wherein the plurality of access points are arranged at known locations in a geographic region, the method further comprising:

the first access point providing geographic location information indicating a known geographic location of the portable computing device;

wherein said providing network access comprises selectively providing network access to the portable computing device based on the known geographic location of the portable computing device.

24. The method of claim 1,

wherein the plurality of access points are arranged at known locations in a geographic region, the method further comprising:

the first access point providing geographic location information indicating a known geographic location of the portable computing device; and

determining an access level for the portable computing device after receiving the identification information;

wherein said providing network access comprises selectively providing network access to the portable computing device based on the known geographic location of the portable computing device and the determined access level.

25. The method of claim 1, further comprising:  
determining an access level for the portable computing device after receiving the  
identification information;

the first access point receiving data from the portable computing device; and  
5 providing the data received from the portable computing device to a destination  
based on the determined access level.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein said providing the data comprises:  
providing the data to one or more resources on the network to allow the portable  
10 computing device access to the one or more resources on the network if the access level is  
a first access level; and

providing the data to a destination for external access out of the network to only  
allow the portable computing device access to other networks if the access level is a  
second access level;  
15 wherein, if the access level is the second access level, the data is not provided to  
the one or more resources on the network.

27. The method of claim 26, further comprising:  
assigning a wireless communication channel for communication between the first  
20 access point and the portable computing device.

28. The method of claim 27, wherein the first access point assigns the wireless  
communication channel for communication between the first access point and the  
portable computing device.

29. The method of claim 27, wherein said assigning comprises assigning the  
wireless communication channel based on one or more of:

the identification information received from the portable computing device,  
the determined wireless service provider, or

a determined access level for the portable computing device, wherein said determined access level is determined after receiving the identification information.

30. A network system, comprising:

5 a network; and

a plurality of access points coupled to the network, wherein each of the plurality of access points is operable to communicate with a portable computing device, wherein each of the plurality of access points is configured to receive identification information from the portable computing device indicating a wireless service provider of a plurality of possible wireless service providers;

10 wherein each of the plurality of access points is operable to determine the wireless service provider indicated in the identification information;

wherein network access is provided to the portable computing device through the determined wireless service provider.

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31. The network system of claim 30, wherein said first access point is operable to accommodate subscribers of each of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

20 32. The network system of claim 31, further comprising:

the first access point recognizing a System ID (SID) of a plurality of possible SIDs, wherein each of the plurality of possible SIDs is associated with a respective one of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

25 33. The network system of claim 32, further comprising:

the first access point maintaining associations between the plurality of possible SIDs and the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

34. The network system of claim 32, further comprising:

the first access point maintaining associations between the plurality of possible SIDs and a plurality of active subscribers.

35. The network system of claim 31, further comprising:

5 the first access point broadcasting a plurality of possible SIDs, wherein each of the plurality of possible SIDs is associated with a respective one of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

36. The network system of claim 30, wherein said first access point is operable  
10 to function as a wireless service provider access point for each of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

37. The network system of claim 30, wherein at least one of said plurality of  
15 access points comprises computer software which implements a plurality of virtual access points, wherein each virtual access point corresponds to one of the plurality of possible wireless service providers, and wherein each virtual access point provides network access services to the corresponding wireless service provider.

38. The network system of claim 37, wherein each virtual access point  
20 provides access point functionality implemented in software, wherein each virtual access point appears as a physical access point to the portable computing device.

39. The network system of claim 37, wherein each virtual access point (AP)  
executes a wireless protocol stack.

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40. The network system of claim 39, wherein the wireless protocol stack comprises an IEEE 802.11 protocol stack.



41. The network system of claim 37, wherein each virtual access point (AP) includes an Extended Service Set ID (ESSID), and wherein each ESSID corresponds to one of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

5 42. The network system of claim 30, wherein each of the plurality of access points is operable to provide data received from the portable computing device to a destination based on the determined wireless service provider.

43. The network system of claim 30, wherein the network system is useable by  
10 subscribers of each of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

44. The network system of claim 30, wherein the determined wireless service provider charges for access by the portable computing device to the network.

15 45. The network system of claim 30, further comprising:  
a memory medium coupled to the network which stores a data structure comprising a list of identification information and a corresponding list of the plurality of possible wireless service providers;

wherein, in determining the wireless service provider for the portable computing  
20 device, each of the plurality of access points is operable to access the memory medium and use the received identification information to determine the wireless service provider.

46. The network system of claim 45, wherein the memory medium is  
25 comprised in one or more of the access points.

47. The network system of claim 30, further comprising:  
a memory medium coupled to the network which stores a data structure comprising a list of wireless service provider identification information, a corresponding

list of the plurality of possible wireless service providers, and associated methods for providing data to the respective plurality of possible wireless service providers;

wherein, in determining the wireless service provider for the portable computing device, each of the plurality of access points is operable to access the memory medium, use the received wireless service provider identification information to determine the wireless service provider, and use an associated method for providing the data to the determined wireless service provider.

48. The network system of claim 47, wherein the memory medium is comprised in one or more of the access points.

49. The network system of claim 47, wherein the data structure stores a destination address indicating a destination specified by the determined wireless service provider; and wherein each of the plurality of access points is operable to provide the data to the destination specified by the determined wireless service provider.

50. The network system of claim 49, wherein the plurality of access points are maintained by a first wireless service provider; and wherein the identification information indicates a second wireless service provider.

51. The network system of claim 30, wherein the identification information comprises a System ID, and wherein the System ID uniquely identifies a wireless service provider of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

52. The network system of claim 30, wherein the identification information comprises an Extended Service Set ID (ESSID), wherein the ESSID uniquely identifies the wireless service provider of the plurality of possible wireless service providers.

53. The network system of claim 30, further comprising:

a portable computing device operated by a user, wherein the portable computing device includes the identification information, wherein the identification information  
5 indicates a first wireless service provider of the plurality of wireless service providers;

wherein, when a first access point of the plurality of access points receives the identification information from the portable computing device, the first access point is operable to determine the first wireless service provider; and

wherein the first access point is operable to provide data received from the  
10 portable computing device according to the first wireless service provider.

54. The network system of claim 30, further comprising:

one or more network devices coupled to the network, wherein each of the one or more network devices corresponds to one of the plurality of possible wireless service  
15 providers;

wherein each of the plurality of access points is operable to provide data received from the portable computing device to a network device corresponding to the determined wireless service provider.

20 55. The network system of claim 30, wherein each of the plurality of access points is operable to provide the data to the destination in a secure manner.

56. The network system of claim 30, wherein the plurality of access points are arranged at known locations in a geographic region, wherein each access point is operable  
25 to provide geographic location information indicating a known geographic location of the portable computing device; and

wherein network access is selectively provided to the portable computing device based on the known geographic location of the portable computing device.